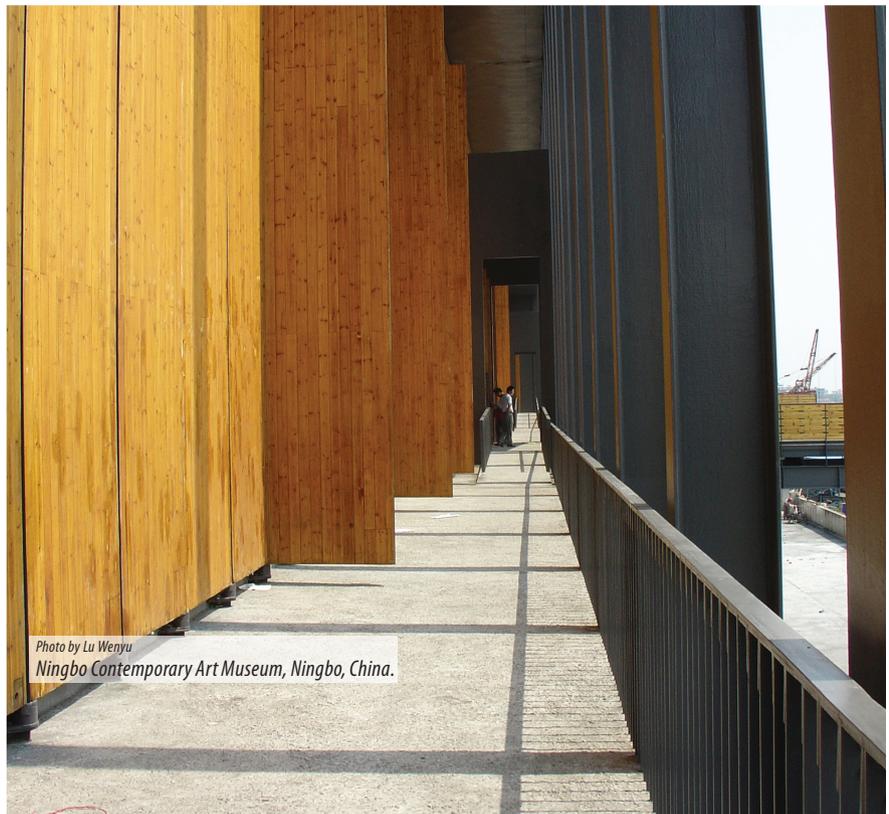


Architecture of Resistance

Though named the Amateur Architecture Studio, Wang Shu's practice demonstrates the makings of a virtuoso, in complete command of the instruments of architecture, form, scale, material, space and light. The 2012 Pritzker Laureate pursues an uncompromising and responsible architecture that arises from sensitivity to culture and place.

Text: Shalmali Wagle

Images: courtesy Amateur Architecture Studio



"We must not demolish history in order to develop."

– Wang Shu



"The architecture of the 2012 Pritzker Prize Laureate, Wang Shu opens new horizons while at the same time resonates with place and memory. His buildings have the unique ability to evoke the past, without making direct references to history"

– Jury Citation

A question was raised in the 1960s by Paul Ricoeur's *History and Truth*. 'How does one become modern and yet return to sources; how does one preserve an old, dormant civilisation and yet maintain pace with universal progression?' Half a century later, the work of 2012 Pritzker Laureate, Wang Shu, discloses that architecture can resist the homogeneity inherent in modernity; that neither prospects in the contradiction require dismissal, and that instead architecture can be mediatory. His philosophy interprets architecture as a medium for conglomeration of dualities that incorporates both influences and evolves as a harmonious dialectic. A somewhat paradoxical proposal, his work emphasises the need for architecture to intervene in the competing elements of, on one hand, the consistency of modern structural forms, and on the other, preservation of vernacular roots, without having to feebly succumb to either of the stereotypical styles.

The 'Amateur' Spirit

A hundred years ago in China, the people who built houses were artisans; there was no theoretical foundation for architecture. Today, an official architectural system has been established. However, Amateur Architecture Studio chooses the ancient 'amateur spirit' over this customary system. Having worked with craftsmen for ten years to gain experience at actual building without the responsibility of design, Wang Shu and Lu Wenyu founded their professional practice in Hangzhou in 1997. Their interpretation of the word 'amateur' is relatively close to its conventional definition; one that engages in a study, sport or activity for pleasure rather than for benefit or professional reasons. The nomenclature can be assumed as a partial response to their critique of the

profession in China, which they view as complicit in the callous demolition of vernacular heritage and excessive construction of unfeeling modernity. The studio prides the latent "handicraft" aspect of architecture and upholds it powerfully in retaliation to the prevalent trend of the "professionalised, soulless architecture practiced today".

Wang Shu's work procedure has three distinct stages. The first is to convince the government and the client; the second is to deal with the design details in relation to construction issues; and the third is the acceptance of the building by its users. His design process is very similar to that of a traditional Chinese painter; he first studies nature and the context. For about a week, without any drawing at all, the design materialises in his mind. The next step involves a discussion about details and materials, the entire process being one of thinking, drawing and discussing.

Wang Shu can be seen as a scholar, craftsman and architect, in that order. His architecture resonates a temporary character. Choosing to work hand-in-hand with time, it has the unique ability to be replaced or transformed during its course, so that it remains timeless and yet is of its time. His architecture is open to change and adapts constantly in response to the environment and conditions, even those conditions that arise during construction itself. His work demonstrates that architecture is spontaneous and it is so for the simple reason that architecture is a matter of everyday life, reflecting the spontaneous changes that occur in it. The consequence is an enduring fusion of rational, functional and tectonic logic with an enriching sense of mystery and myth.



*Photo by Lu Wenyu
The Chinese character for 'enclose' forms the theme with courtyards being important aspects of each building.*



*Photo by Lv Hengzhong
Each building is thoughtfully designed based on purpose, with regard to its relationship to the campus.*

Xiangshan Campus, China Academy of Art, Hangzhou, China

The Xiangshan Campus, China Academy of Art, located in Hangzhou City in China, imitates the familiarity of a small intimate town. The campus consists of 67,000sqm of built-area including a library, a gallery, a small stadium, a workshop tower, six academic and workshop buildings, two traditional bridges across the river and two hillside art-studios. The Chinese character for 'enclose' is the central theme of the series with courtyards and gardens forming a significant focal aspect of each building. Besides modifying the micro-climate of the place, these enclosed spaces serve several other purposes for each building; in terms of provision of space for events, gatherings, study and relaxation. Each building is carefully designed based on its purpose, location and its relationship to the contiguous campus. The base of the handicraft-school is made with stone using local traditional techniques, as a symbolic gesture representing an irrefutable association to its surrounding context. A modern construction that makes use of steel framing, windows, skylights, and other modern amenities, one of its most striking characteristic is that it appears as though built over a hundred years ago, withstanding the ravages of time.

"In spite of his age, young for an architect, he has shown his ability to work successfully at various scales. The Xiangshan Campus of China Academy of Arts in Hangzhou is like a small town, providing a setting for learning and living for students, professors and staff. The exterior and interior connections between buildings and private and public spaces provide a rich environment where an emphasis on liveability prevails. He is also capable of creating buildings on an intimate scale, such as the small exhibition hall or pavilions inserted into the fabric of the historic centre of Hangzhou. As in all great architecture, he does this with a master's naturalness, making it look as if it were an effortless exercise."

– Jury Citation



*Photo by Lv Hengzhong
The use of recycled building materials lends a certain impulsiveness, creating rich tactile collages.*

“Wang Shu’s architecture is exemplary in its strong sense of cultural continuity and re-invigorated tradition. The past is literally given new life as the relationship between past and present is explored. The question of the proper relation of present to past is particularly timely, for the recent process of urbanisation in China invites debate as to whether architecture should be anchored in tradition or should look only toward the future. As with any great architecture, Wang Shu’s work is able to transcend that debate, producing an architecture that is timeless, deeply rooted in its context and yet universal.”

– Jury Citation



*Photo by Lu Wenyu
The relationship between the buildings and the in-between spaces.*



Photo by Lu Wenyu
The curving sloping roofs and the contained landscaped courts.

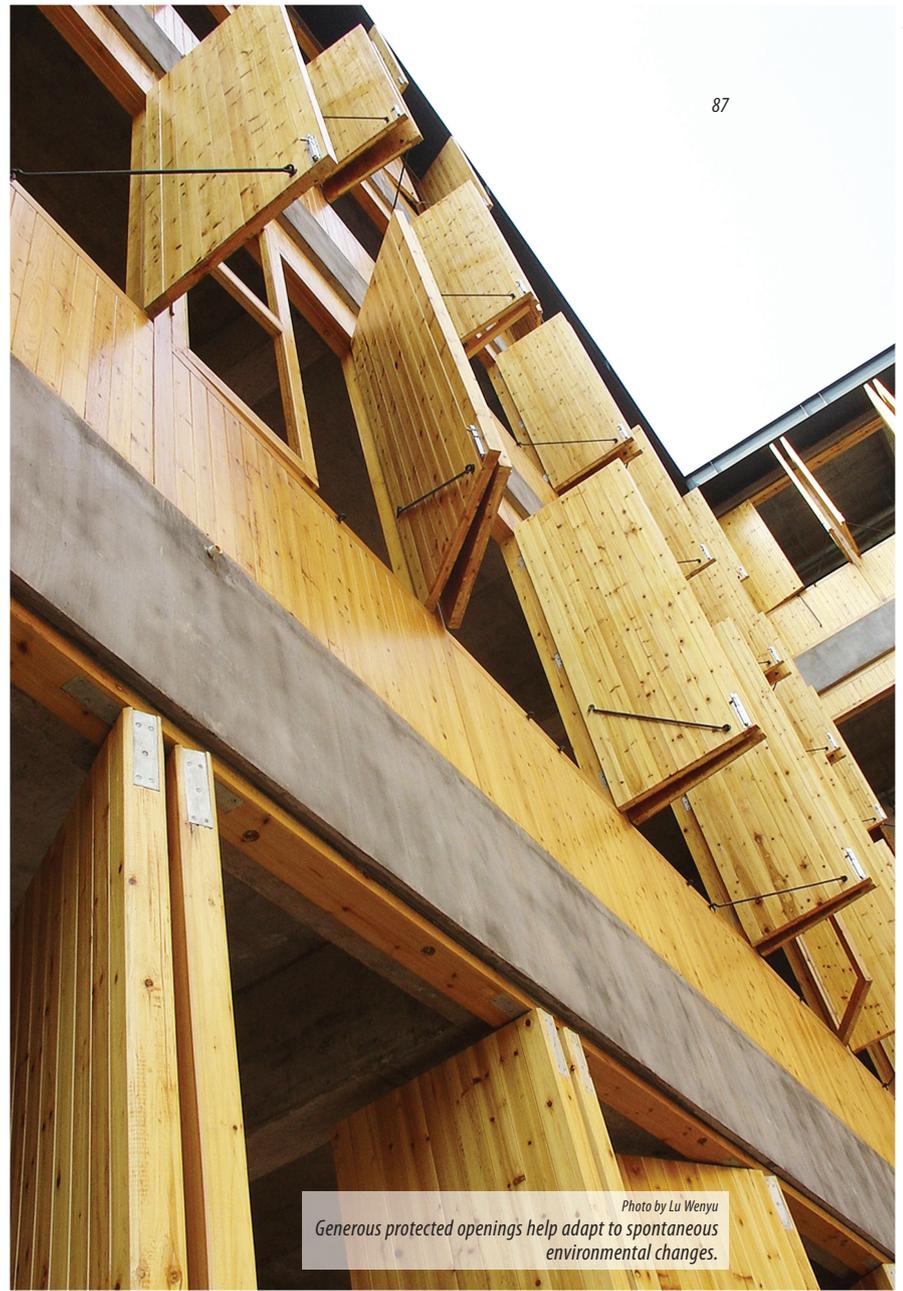


Photo by Lu Wenyu
Generous protected openings help adapt to spontaneous environmental changes.



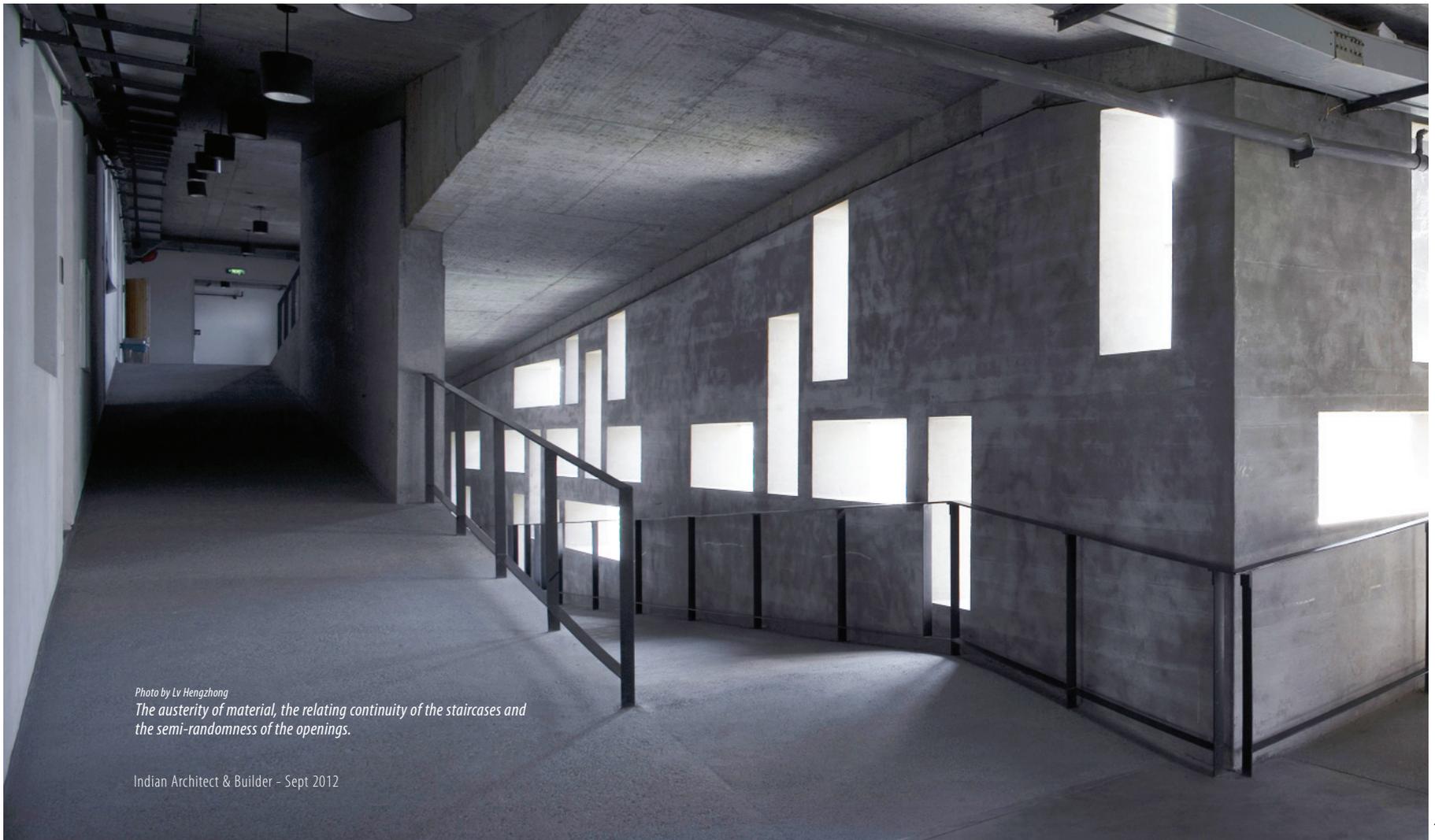
Long traditional bridges allow connectivity within the campus.



Photo by Lu Wenyu
A poised composition of architectural dominance and human scale.



*Photo by Lv Hengzhong
A quality that is timeless, anchored to tradition, culturally sensitive
and yet fluent in universal vocabulary.*



*Photo by Lv Hengzhong
The austerity of material, the relating continuity of the staircases
and the semi-randomness of the openings.*

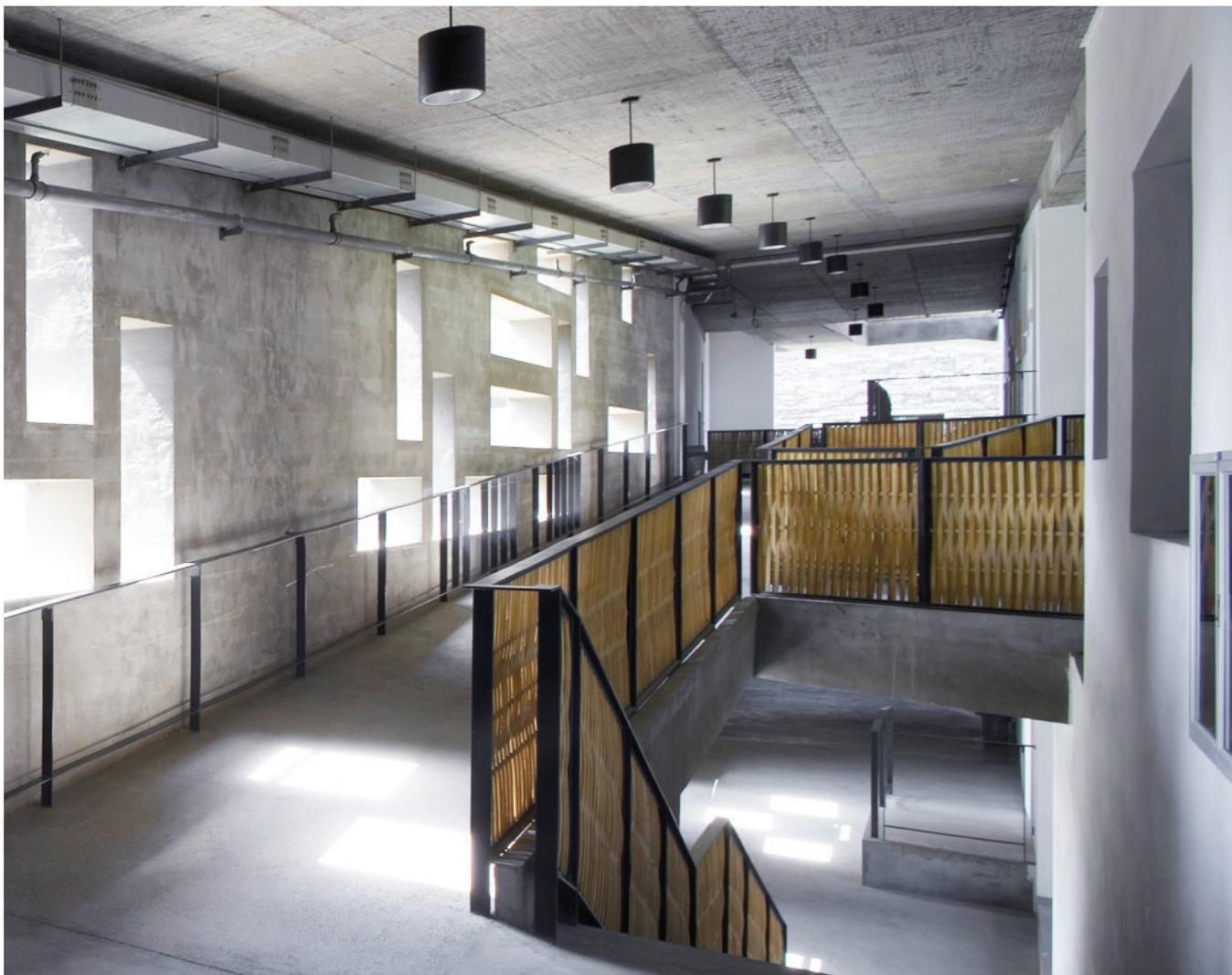




Photo by Lv Hengzhong
Over two million pieces of tiles salvaged from demolished traditional houses are used for roofing.



Arbitrary cut-outs maintain visual connectivity and frame random views.

"Wang Shu knows how to embrace the challenges of construction and employ them to his advantage. His approach to building is both critical and experimental. Using recycled materials, he is able to send several messages on the careful use of resources and respect for tradition and context as well as give a frank appraisal of technology and the quality of construction today, particularly in China. Wang Shu's works that use recycled building materials, such as roof tiles and bricks from dismantled walls, create rich textural and tactile collages. Working in collaboration with construction workers, the outcome sometimes has an element of unpredictability, which in his case, gives the buildings a freshness and spontaneity."

— Jury Citation



Sudden intentional moments of oddity lend surprise in the complexity of the overall scheme.



*Photo by Lv Hengzhang
The shallow pool in the south catches the inverted reflection of the house in the water.*

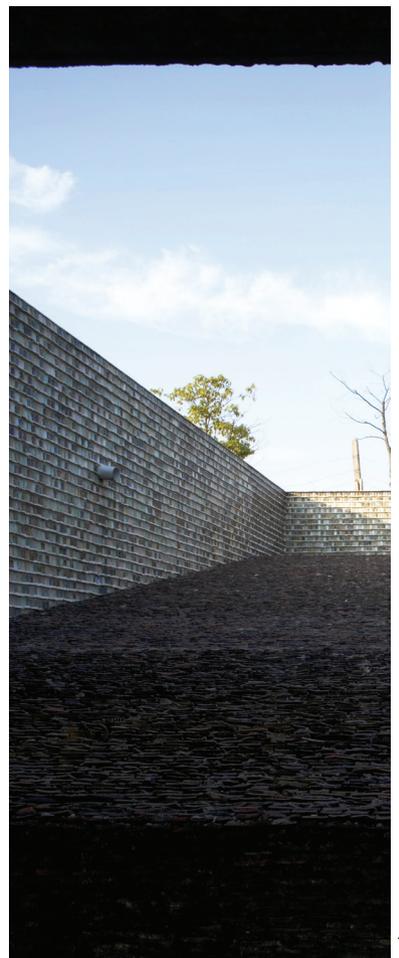
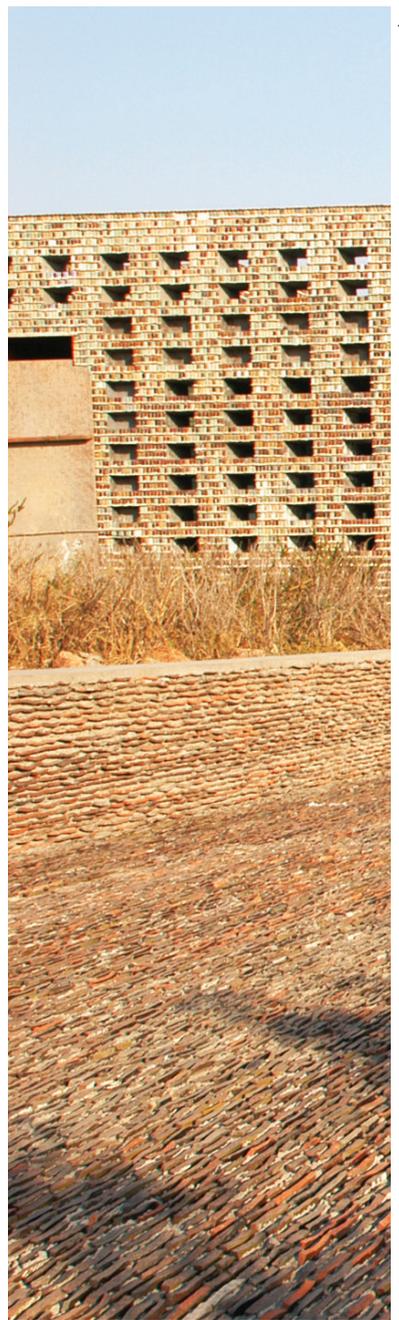




Photo by Lv Hengzhong
The west and east-facing walls are punctured with little holes.



Photo by Lv Hengzhong
The view moves upward along a slope and then disappears in infinity.

Ceramic House, Jinhua City, China

The small 100sqm Ceramic House and its café are designed as a container. The design of the café-house is similar to that of an ink stone, a one-storey house with its front facing the south and the rear facing the north. Several trees are planted on the top of the ink stone slope. The view from within moves upward along a slope and then gradually vanishes to infinity. The west and east-facing walls are punctured with little holes, prominently responsible for the flow of air, penetration of light and emphasising the direction of the house. The house has two main entrance doors; one is on the east and the other on the west with a path piercing right through the building. A stair near the west door leads to the roof. Colourful pieces of porcelain are pasted on the inner and outer walls of the house adding a playful touch to the robustness of its architecture; the pieces arranged irregularly to present all colours in Chinese ceramic. On the north is a three-metre-high earth bank to which the house is anchored and which in turn restricts the hustle-bustle from the adjacent road on the north. A shallow pool in the south catches an inverted reflection of the house in the water.

Ningbo Tengtou Pavilion, Shanghai Expo 2010, Shanghai, China

Mimicking a traditional Tengtou folk home, the Ningbo Tengtou Pavilion at the 2010 Shanghai Expo was a 1,500sqm eco-house made entirely from recycled materials salvaged from old ruined buildings. Inspired by a Chinese painting from the Ming Dynasty, the pavilion was designed as a countryside building with punctures and trees. Located in the eco-experience zone of the Expo, it employed wind and solar-powered facilities, water and waste-treatment systems, green plants, roof gardens and other eco-solutions. Designed with spaces flaunting open walls, green hanging walls and roof gardens, the pavilion enabled one to harmonise with nature as the households in the town of Tengtou usually do. The pavilion radiates antique beauty, with traditional folk house elements embodied on the doors, windows, walls and roof structures, flaunting the unique cultural features of a typical Chinese town.





Photo by Lu Wenyu
A pavilion made entirely from recycled materials from ruined old buildings.

"To look at the state of the profession, it would seem that anything is possible, and more often than not, we get anything! Form for its own sake has become a superficial discipline. Wang Shu and Lu Wenyu, however, have avoided the sensational and the novel. In spite of what is still a short period in practice, they have delivered a modern, rational, poetic and mature body of varying-scaled public work. Their work is already a modern cultural asset to the rich history or Chinese architecture and culture."

—Jury Citation



Photo by Lu Wenyu
The open walls, green hanging walls and roof gardens.



Photo by Lu Wenyu
A new countryside building formed by holes and trees.



Photo by Lv Hengzhong
The architecture appears as though it has been there for centuries, left behind by natural forces.



Photo by Lv Hengzhong
Small and erratic windows scattered across the walls seemingly at random, reveal nothing of the interior.



Ningbo History Museum, Ningbo, China

At first glance, the Ningbo History Museum in Ningbo appears as though it has been there for centuries, left behind by natural forces. The facade constructed of recycled brick from the area is further carved in a geologic form that agrees with the nearby scenery. Though a powerful and moving structure of 40,000sqm, the museum lies low between two tall office buildings, and is barely registered on the skyline from a distance. In a world where towers are erected in days, the Ningbo History Museum is devoted to tradition, history, sense of place, sustainable use of materials, and the people who will inhabit it.

The 24-metre-high façade walls are made of concrete on a wood and bamboo frame and clad in an armadillo shell of twenty different types of grey and red bricks and tiles, drawing on the cultural memory of a traditional town. The technique is borrowed from 'wapan' tiling, a tradition of emergency construction during post-typhoon periods, frequent in the region. Windows of small and erratic rectangular shapes are scattered across the walls seemingly at random, revealing nothing of the interior. Surrounded by mountains, the site was originally inhabited, but dozens of old villages were razed to rubble to accommodate two new government administration buildings, a vast, empty plaza and a cultural centre. The rural vitality of the site could not be renewed, for it had simply ceased to exist and all that remained of the villages were acres of broken tiles and bricks. Set between the somewhat incongruous ensembles of new buildings, blending effortlessly, the museum is the single vital substance that responds to the natural environment, local history and customs, and brings back the memory of a destroyed past.



Photo by Lv Hengzhong
The form is an outgrowth of the ancient practice of building to reflect natural settings.



Photo by Lv Hengzhong
The architecture is stripped down to the essentials, dissolving into its surroundings.



Photo by Lv Hengzhong
Thousands of tiles cover the outside wall, drawing the memory of a cultural town.



Photo by Lv Hengzhong
An intentional association with the space and scale of local traditional Ningbo villages.

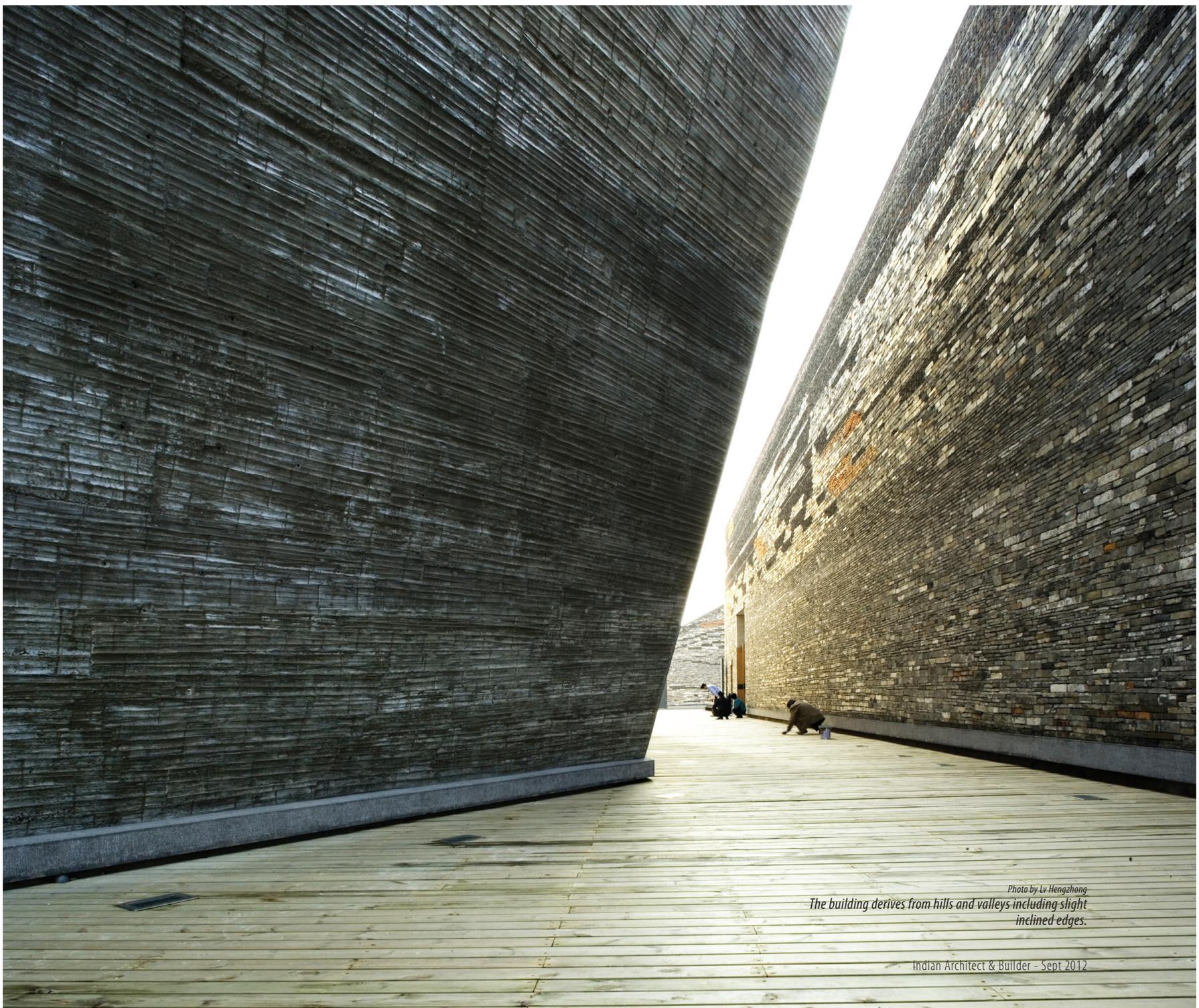
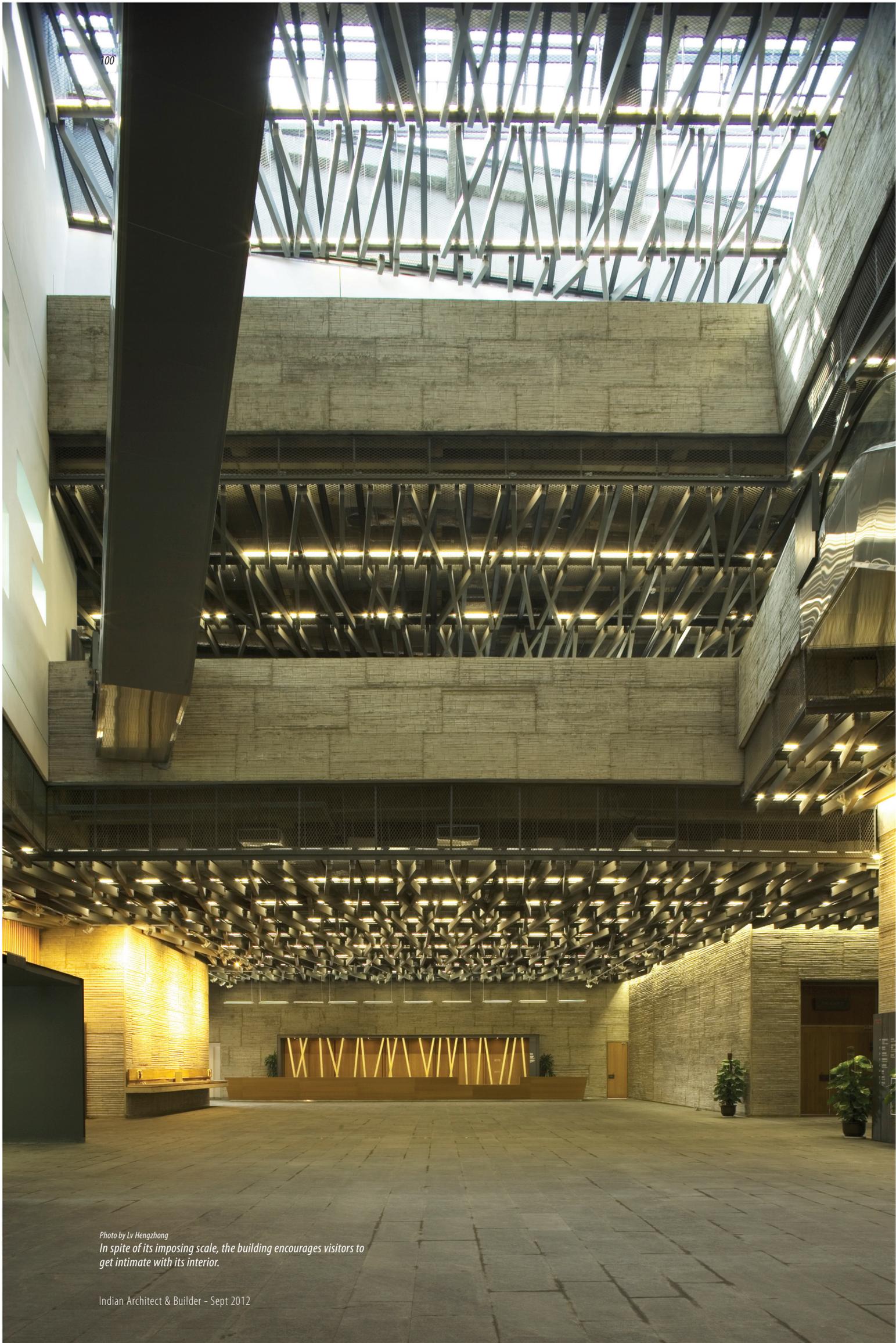


Photo by Lv Hengzhong
The building derives from hills and valleys including slight inclined edges.



*Photo by Lv Hengzhang
In spite of its imposing scale, the building encourages visitors to
get intimate with its interior.*

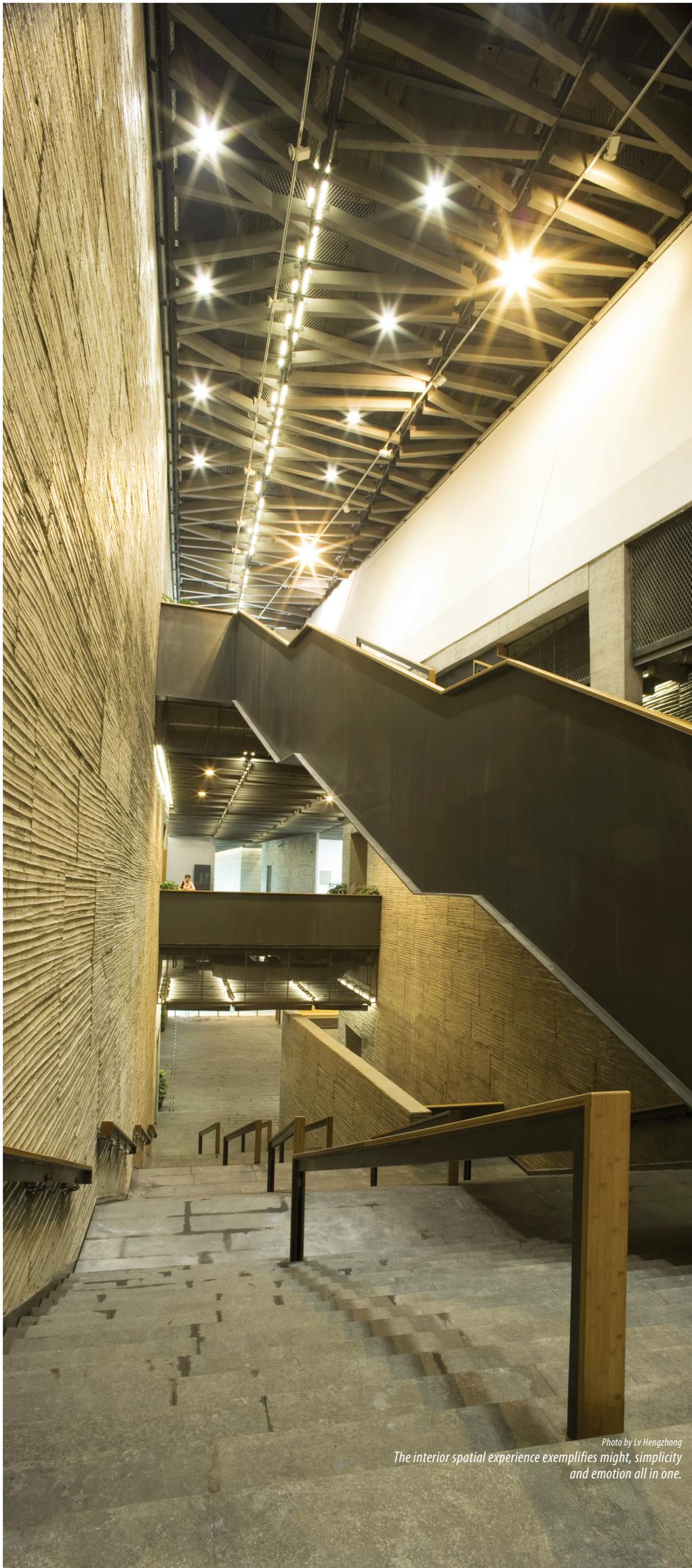


Photo by Lv Hengzhong
The interior spatial experience exemplifies might, simplicity and emotion all in one.

“Wang Shu’s buildings have a very rare attribute - a commanding and even, at times, monumental presence, while functioning superbly and creating a calm environment for life and daily activities. The History Museum at Ningbo is one of those unique buildings that while striking in photos, is even more moving when experienced. The museum is an urban icon, a well-tuned repository for history and a setting where the visitor comes first. The richness of the spatial experience, both in the exterior and interior is remarkable. This building embodies strength, pragmatism and emotion all in one.”

- Jury Citation ■